

In Mexico's drug war, church caught in the storm

Malcolm Beith | Feb. 11, 2011



A shrine honors Jes's Malverde, a mythical outlaw whom many Mexicans consider the patron saint of drug trafficking. (Malcolm Beith)

Benjamín Jiménez Hernández, the bishop of Culiacán, Sinaloa, extended his arm. Speaking in his packed and sweltering church in northwestern Mexico, he called for action, as his flock sweated it out. "We must fight for our faith, we must fight for our future. ... This heat we're living in today, we must use our faith to conquer it."

A group of young narcos, as Mexico's drug traffickers are known, had been killed the day before in Jiménez's violence-plagued city. Hundreds of locals had turned up to the church to hear his words of calm, braving the 90-degree heat inside to hear what they hoped might be solutions.

There were none. As they filed out of Mass, many of the faithful simply shook their heads. They headed back to their homes, dismayed, perhaps comforted, but nothing more. The next day, the headlines offered up more of the same: three more Culiacán narcos butchered.

More than 35,000 people have died in Mexico's drug war, which has been raging since December 2006. Most of the deceased have been narcos, many of them little older than 18. Soldiers have been deployed throughout the country to try to quell the violence; local authorities have tried to institute social programs -- with the federal government's support -- in order to help reconstruct decimated communities. Municipal police have been purged of corrupt elements, only to find the corruption return almost immediately like a cancer.

Mexico is a traditionally conservative, Catholic nation, but enjoys a strict separation of church and state. As a result, the church's role in the war on drugs, historically, has always been a largely apolitical one: Dioceses have often served the needs of their constituents; the hierarchy has issued statements on security; and the church has largely stayed out of the fray.

But at times, it has found itself caught up in the tide, and even at the center of the storm. In May 1993, a team of hit men from the Tijuana drug cartel descended on Guadalajara airport. Their target: Joaquín "Chapo" Guzmán, leader of the rival Sinaloa cartel. The Tijuana gunmen spotted a vehicle in the airport parking lot that they believed belonged to Chapo -- a white Mercury Grand Marquis, a car commonly driven by narcos. The Zapruder of the drug war and sprayed a hail of bullets into the vehicle.

But it wasn't Chapo in the car; he was in a dark green Buick Sedan nearby. In the Mercury Grand Marquis was Cardinal Juan Jesús Posadas Ocampo, archbishop of Guadalajara. Amid the chaos, Chapo rolled away from the scene, hopped in a taxi and sped off to a safe house. The cardinal was dead, his body riddled with 14 bullets.

Investigations into that 1993 incident have left much to be desired. Some officials believe the Tijuana cartel targeted the cardinal intentionally: They were professionals, they knew what car Chapo was driving, how could they possibly make such a rookie mistake?

"Lies! Lies!" shouted one high-ranking police official as he pointed to the official report on the airport shootout. "You can't trust anyone here -- not journalists, not secretaries, not cardinals, no one! [The truth] will kill you here."

Several times since 1993, investigations have been reopened into the killing of the cardinal. On one occasion, it was revealed that in December 1993 -- about seven months after the shooting -- Ramón Arellano Félix met with the papal nuncio. The nuncio blessed the man, who had allegedly taken part in the homicide of Posadas and was known as one of the most hotheaded and dangerous drug traffickers in Mexico at the time. The nuncio met with another Arellano brother, Benjamín, in 1994.

The nuncio never considered turning them in, he said, because "this was a matter of conscience. My work as a priest is one thing, but to act as an authority is another."



In April 2009, another archbishop found himself at the center of drug war controversy. The

archbishop of Durango, Héctor González Martínez, took the authorities to task for not having caught "Chapo" Guzmán, by now Mexico's most-wanted man and most notorious drug trafficker.

González openly showed his disgust over the fact that Chapo was still free. "He lives in the hills of Durango," González stormed, further specifying that Chapo was now calling the mountain town of Guanacevi home. "Everyone knows it, except the authorities."

The claims caused an uproar. Some authorities called for the archbishop to be investigated; if he knew with so much certainty where Chapo was, then surely he was complicit in some way? The archbishop was asked by the Mexican hierarchy to stay quiet on the subject in the immediate aftermath, but in late 2010, he once again spoke out about Chapo. "He's omnipresent," González said, naming several towns where the drug lord had purportedly been spotted. This time, however, González was more cautious, admitting that he had no concrete evidence of Chapo's whereabouts; his claims were based on hearsay.

The proclamations, however, once again reignited debate over the church's relationship with the nation's

narcos. Although it had traditionally stayed out of the fray, the church had without a doubt crossed paths with the narcos. During the 71-year rule of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) between 1929 and 2000, Mexico's drug traffickers were not necessarily considered the criminals they are today. The narcos attended social functions throughout Mexico, at which politicians, businessmen and priests would be present. The narcos attended baptisms and weddings of important social figures. One priest in Mexicali, on the northern border, claims to have baptized several of Chapo's children. In 1983, Mexico's most powerful drug trafficker, Miguel Ángel Félix Gallardo (aka El Padrino, or the Godfather) attended the wedding of Rodolfo Sánchez Duarte, the son of a former governor. Officiating at the wedding was the bishop of Culiacán.

The relationships weren't necessarily clear-cut; after all, in many parts of Mexico, says George Grayson, a longtime Mexico expert at the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Va., "drug barons have long been members of the local establishment."

"The church justifies its relations with the narco-barons on the grounds that these contacts may change the criminals' behavior and lead them to the path of glory. If not, members of the flock emerge with a church building whose roof doesn't leak and schools that have desks," he says.



Indeed, the narcos have allegedly long donated money, known commonly as narco-limosnas ("narco-alms"), to the church. For years, the church has backed away from such claims, sometimes denying them furiously, other times simply asking how one might prove such accusations. But on Nov. 1, 2010, in a printed statement in *Desde la Fe*, newspaper of the Mexico City archdiocese, the church hierarchy admitted that some of the "dirtiest and bloodiest" money in Mexico could well have been used to build chapels and other facilities. This was "immoral," the church declared. "Nothing can justify allowing this sort of situation to occur."

While local priests have played a very reassuring role in comforting victims and frightened residents amid the violence, the hierarchy's pronouncements throughout the drug war have failed to win over the hearts of a declining membership -- church attendance is dropping at a rate of roughly 1.7 percent a year, according to Mexico's national statistics institute.

At times, the church has appeared completely out of touch.



Last year, for instance, Mexico City archdiocesan spokesman Fr. Hugo Valdemar criticized the liberal, left-wing Mexico City government of Marcelo Ebrard, which has legalized gay marriage, instituted social and health programs, and managed to improve security in the capital. "He and his government have created laws that are destructive to the family, which cause worse harm than drug trafficking," Valdemar said.

Valdemar was promptly attacked by columnists and the citizenry alike: Comparing Ebrard, no matter how conservative one might be, to the narcos was simply offensive and wrong.

The Catholic church has also faced competition for the attention of the Mexican populace from other strains of religion and pseudoreligious groups. The worshipers of Santa Muerte (literally, Saint Death), for instance, have grown in great numbers in recent years. Santa Muerte is a skeletal, morbid figure, to which the disenfranchised -- criminals, the poor, young men -- have increasingly turned for comfort. Shrines dot the streets of downtrodden neighborhoods in Mexico City, Culiacán, Ciudad Juárez and Tijuana. Devotees light candles in

front of Santa Muerte statuettes and say prayers, just as they might do in a Catholic church -- if they identified with Catholicism. In prisons across the country, inmates charged with drug trafficking and other serious crimes construct Santa Muerte statuettes out of wood and sell them through a prison work program.

Until recently, Santa Muerte was considered to be just another alternative faith. Only a few concerned parents and the Catholic church hierarchy expressed concern, even as Santa Muerte's devoted following grew. In essence, a Mexican teenager following Santa Muerte was no different than a youngster deciding to dress "goth" and listen to depressing music; the Catholic church hierarchy disavowed Santa Muerte's legitimacy, but the so-called cult wasn't deemed a real threat.



Then came the drug war. Alongside massive seizures of drugs, guns and undeclared cash,

Mexican soldiers began finding Santa Muerte statues in the homes of drug traffickers. Almost overnight, Santa Muerte came to be associated with the "evil" and "cancer," as some officials called the drug trade. A Santa Muerte leader was gunned down, and a link to organized crime -- at least in the minds of some media and officials -- was established. "Distinguishing between religious expression -- whatever [kind] this might be -- and that which could be used as an excuse for a crime [is a] fine line but not an irrelevant one," says a former high-ranking official from the Mexican Attorney General's Office. He adds that no one in Mexico is being persecuted for worshiping the likes of Santa Muerte, but insists that educating the public about the relationship between some rituals and criminal conduct is absolutely necessary.

Another group purporting to religiosity is La Familia, a small drug cartel that preaches about the evils of methamphetamine, all the while producing and distributing the illicit drug in its home state of Michoacán. La Familia even has its own "bible," which the group claims is religious and spiritual in nature. Members of La Familia are often seen carrying the book; they distribute it at local events. But the contents of the book are anything but spiritual: "It is better to die fighting head-on than on your knees and humiliated; it is better to be a living dog than a dead lion," reads one of the many violent passages inside.

Both academics and the authorities say that La Familia's use of religion is a clear ploy to organize and rally young members who are disillusioned with society and the opportunities before them, and that there is nothing the slightest bit sincere about their purported religiosity.

But for representatives of the Catholic church in areas like Michoacán, convincing their flock of that reality is a daily challenge -- and at times, a dangerous one. Some priests admit to having received threats from La Familia; others have courageously led protests for peace in the region. Priests in drug-trafficking regions throughout the country increasingly face the threat of extortion for their safety, according to the nonprofit Citizens' Institute for Crime Studies.

For Catholics in Mexico, the role of the church in the future fight against drug trafficking remains unclear. The Vatican's secretary of state, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, for one, backed the Mexican government's drug war, saying it was a "duty" to fight these cartels because their actions represent "the most hypocritical and terrible way of murdering the dignity and personality of today's youth."

But he had no immediate answers for how the church might treat narcos. "Certainly, excommunication is a very harsh deterrent that the church has used to deal with the most serious crimes in its history, from the very first centuries," Bertone said. "But ... excommunication is a punishment that touches only those who have some form of ecclesiastical conscience, an ecclesiastical education."

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